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TRUE STORY OF WHY TWO PEOPLE

LEFT GERMANY IN 1923

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LEFT GERMANY IN 1923

This is a true story of my grandparents, Max and Anna Mela Kopf, and the hardships they endured to reach America.

In 1920 Max Kopf, who was a German prisoner of war, was finally allowed to go home. He had served his country for six years as a Lieutenant in the German Army on the battlefield from 1914 to 1918 and as a prisoner of war from 1918 to 1920. He was discharged from military service and got his job back as a travel agent for the North German Lloyd Steamship Company in Munich.

Financially, Max Kopf's family was not doing too well. His mother died in 1915 while he was fighting in Yugoslavia. His father's 24 room hotel with theater depended entirely on tourist trade. Since August, 1914, the German government used most all railroad transportation for military activities. Civilians found themselves with no transportation and the tourist became non-existent. Then the government requisitioned all 24 horses of his father's which had supplied the only income through sand and log transportation. The mortgage payments fell behind. In the end the hotel and everything were lost.

Max soon fell in love with Anna Mela Meir. The question came up: Where could they live when they got married? Although he had served his country for many years, when he finally needed a place to live, he got no considerations. Rent control had been established by the socialistically communistically-inclined city rulers with the permission of

the leaders of the occupation armies. At that time the city of Munich had garnished all rights of occupancy in all living quarters, city and near suburbs. Without the city's permission, no one could move into any place. A single person could not even apply for a registration number which one needed in order to move. So in order to qualify for registration, Max and Mela decided to get married secretly. On January 22, 1921, they had a legal civil wedding which was witnessed by two close friends.

They received a green registration card, which listed them as applicants for an apartment. This card did not entitle them to look at any apartments. Only owners of the red card, the urgency card, could do that. They had to wait until over 26,000 other parties had their apartments. After four months of secrecy they decided to tell Mela's uncle, who was a priest in one of the churches in Munich. The bishop was a very good friend of her uncle. The uncle managed to get a dispensation from the usual four weeks announcement from the pulpit about people intending to get married. On May 14, 1921, Max and Mela were married in the church of her uncle. Now they were free to move together. They were fortunate to find two furnished rooms with kitchen privileges, but located in a suburb far from Munich which meant a long streetcar ride to work for Max.

After a year, with the first baby on the way, they realized they would need more room. Their registration number for apartments in and near Munich was 26,286 and chances of moving into the city were almost impossible. However, they noticed an ad in the paper. An apartment house, 5 stories with 18 families occupying it, was built on quicksand and one wall was cracked from ground to roof.

The city would have to condemn it and the 18 families would be homeless. If five parties with enough money to pay for the reparations and become 1/5 owner of the building could be found, the five apartments affected would be released from the control of occupancy and the new owners could move in. With Mela's dowry money and her stocks, and the sale of her grand piano, they had enough money to pay for 1/5 share of the house and the repairs. Four other parties were found and the walls were torn down and rebuilt. But the mounting inflation of the German Mark caused the cost of materials to rise. More and more money had to be put in. The other 13 apartments were still city-controlled for occupancy and rent. The communistic rulers sacrificed the home owners to please the weary public. Rents were fixed unbelieveably low. Even when the inflation was going on, the rents were kept artificially low to please the "majority of the public".

City inspectors came in periodically to estimate the space of each room in every apartment. Adding up the figures resulted in cubic meters of space lived in. The apartments were classified from class "A" to class "Z". Just about the end of each month the Housing Department would announce the rent due for the next month according to classification. Inflation galloped ahead but the rents lagged behind so much that the monthly rent of an apartment would bring in just enough money to buy one quart of milk per month.

The owner could not choose the tenant. The next number on the registration card moved in. Sometimes undesirable people moved in. One of the five owners had to collect the rents and Max was nominated for the job. Everyone seemed to hate the land-

lord. If a tenant was out of work he did not have to pay any rent. The city made that a rule. The landlord could not doubt the tenant's truthfulness. He could not prove the tenant was working even when he saw him leave each morning with a lunch box.

Many problems arose. The electricity was on one meter so the bill was divided into 18 shares. Tenants always argued that they used very little electricity and their neighbor used much more. What could be done? The inflation skyrocketed, but the taxes had to be paid. The chimney-sweeper cleaned the chimney according to city rules at the cost to the home owners.. The farmer who pumped out the big cistern every month also had to be paid. Trying to skip a month didn't work out as the sewage seeped into the cellar. A tenant complained to the Health Department and Max was told that if the mess was not cleaned up, he would be put in jail.

Time went on and their second child was on the way. They realized that the available living space was much too small. They decided to go to the Housing Authority and ask permission to exchange their one-bedroom apartment for one with 2 bedrooms in their own house. They thought this wouldn't be too difficult to do. When Mela's interview came up she got the following decision on her case: "Did you say that you expect your second child?.... Come back when you have your twelfth!" They were very insulted and aggravated at such a reply.

At this time if one were working and received pay one could buy food or use food stamps which were issued. There were bread stamps for 1 pound a week, egg stamps for one egg a week, meat stamps for 1/4 lb. a week, flour stamps and sugar stamps. Sometimes

could eat in one of the few restaurants, turning in required food stamps along with the money. As there was a great shortage of everything, somebody had to stand in line at the food market for hours. If the store ran out of provisions before it was turn, it was too bad. Next time the line-up was at 4:00 a.m. The store owner was tied up with strict price controls. Many times he was forced to sell his goods at a lower price than the next shipment would cost him wholesale. He was due for a loss. With inflation going on at uncontrollable speed the prices rose, the wages rose. At one moment, could have paid for a whole week's groceries, but by the time got the money belated, could only pay for a small amount. The government printing office could not print the money fast enough to keep up with the demand. There were still many high denomination money bills around the printing office which did not get into circulation because they had lost their value. 1000 Mark bills were overprinted diagonally across with higher values.

More than ever Max and Mela were thinking about getting out of the country. They were greatly disappointed with Germany. The situation seemed hopeless. Some persons they knew of succeeded in going to America. Could they be that lucky, too?

Business was slow at the travel office. The Allied Governments had taken away all good German ships, airplanes, and railroads. The few people who were able to emmigrate had to be booked through American, English, Hollandish or Italian Steamship Lines. The Government Information Bureau in Berlin offered information about living conditions in foreign countries. A questionaire could be filled out which was then submitted for a round table

discussion of people who had been in different countries. Written advice was to be returned to the inquirer. One day Max filled out a questionaire. It was a detailed description of himself, his family, age, occupation, health condition, financial standing, and languages spoken or understood. An answer was returned saying, "Stay where you are. You have a life-long job. With your background you would have to be classified as a white-collar worker. Thousands of high school students are graduated in America every year. Your language capability is insufficient, your financial situation is too meager. So, don't leave." But Max and Mela still were hopeful of a way out!

There were several requirements for getting a passport to America. In Munich you not only had to contribute money to the church voluntarily, but the city made you pay a church tax to support all of the churches. This tax had to be paid up. Max's tax was 96 million Marks, which he paid on May 8, 1923. Another requirement was to furnish an affidavit of support. Somebody had to guarantee the the immigrant would not go on public welfare support. Somebody had to take over the financial responsibility for 5 years. Mela knew an aunt in Phoenix, Arizona. She was a widow with two children, so it was no use to bother her for she could be of no help.

On a streetcar ride in Munich, Max noticed one of his customers a few seats away. Max had a message for him. "Mr. Link, if you want those two girls to get to the United States before the quota closes for the year, you better hurry up and take them to the American Consul to get their papers ready." Mr. Link said, "Which two girls? I sign up so many girls for housework in the States... You tell them to contact me. I sign so many affidavits!" Jokingly

* Wally Berg, who later married Harry Brodie's widow.

Max said, "If you sign so many, would you sign one for me?" Mr. Link looked at him, contemplating, and after a while said kindly, "Sure, why not?"

Max went back to tell Mela that he could go over to America and that in a year or so she and their son Rudy could follow. She said that either they all go or none. Could Mr. Link sign for all of them? When Max had his appointment with Mr. Link at the American Consul, to Mela and their son came along. Max was very embarrassed for he thought it would be too rude to ask for affidavits for all of them. But when he asked Mr. Link if he would consider an affidavit for all, he said, "Yes." He was a business customer but otherwise a total stranger helping them to a chance for a better life.

Their relatives were not convinced that it would be a good idea to leave Germany and start all over in an unknown country. However, their minds were made up and they began making plans. They would stay in New York City, if Max could get a job with the North German Lloyd with a letter of recommendation. Otherwise they would choose a nearby city, like Buffalo, with a population comparable to Munich.

They now had the affidavits but they also needed money for the trip over. Steamship ticket fares were charged in United States dollars and not in German Marks. Dollars could only be bought with a Government permit, and from Government-regulated banks, and for Government-approved reasons only. They got their permit to buy $500.00 for second class travel expenses. At first they had to deposit the whole amount in German Marks to buy the $500.00. Then the dollars would be given out to entitled purchasers in proportion

to their requests, but only as far as dollars were available to the banks through the Berlin Exchange Office. Sometimes they got $2.00, $5.00 or $25.00.. But the inflation was going on at such speed, that the deposit for $500.00 kept losing value. Every couple of days they had to make up the balance of the requested $500.00. Every bit of income they had was used for the dollar purchases. But this was not enough and Mela's bank account and stocks also had to be used. They auctioned off the furniture, featherbeds, curtains, an antique clock, silver, etc. With no money available for provisions and food supply, they had to use bedsheets, cooking pots, cooking utensils, books, shoes and knick-knacks to barter with country farmers for food supplies. The Government frowned on such extra income for farmers which did not result in additional income tax, and therefore confiscated food supplies at railroad stations. Max and Mela had to get off at suburban stations, or go by bicycle to get the food. Farmers were suspicious of Government informers and getting supplies was very difficult.

The constant increasing inflation made the ~~constantly re-occurring~~ recurring required Mark deposits towards the purchase of still needed American dollars, an ever increasing problem. This is an example of how bad the inflation in Germany was:

Feb. 28, 1923	$1.00	22,700 Marks
May 25, 1923	$1.00	69,500 Marks
July 21, 1923	$1.00	1,097,250 Marks
Nov. 20, 1923	$1.00	4,200,000,000,000 Marks
	$10.00	42,000,000,000,000 Marks
	$100.00	420,000,000,000,000 Marks
	$500.00	2,100,000,000,000,000 Marks
Dec. 31, 1923	$500.00	1,000,000,000,000,000,000 Marks

They still have a receipt for a certified copy to move away from Munich. It was for 11 billion Marks and dated November 24, 1923.

At the end of 1923, just before they left Germany, came the first few samples of the newly issued Reichs-Mark, designated R.M. A new basis of business transactions in U.S. dollars was established and, if going to America, they now could negotiate and sell any property for an agreed dollar amount. Max and Mela sold their one-fifth share of the 18 family apartment house to a co-worker of Max's for $200.00 It had cost them thousands and thousands in German Marks. They still had not received the down payment of $50.00 by the day of their departure from Munich. They were still short of their $500.00. Max went to the lawyer representing the buyer with an urgent plea for their agreed downpayment and the lawyer advanced it. The rest of the $200.00 was never paid.

The train left from Munich at 4:25 p.m. to the seaport of Bremerhaven. They had 17 parcels and were unsure of transportation costs. In Bremerhaven at the North-German Lloyd office, they found out they would be charged for luggage, Mela's ticket, one-year old Rudy's half price ticket, but the North German Lloyd would cancel the price of Max's fare, as recognition for his more than 13 years service.

They were due to arrive in America at the end of December, 1923. The voyage was extremely rough and stormy. Mela, who was expecting, was very seasick. They had problems with Rudy for they couldn't take him anywhere on ship without complaints. Before they arrived in America, the captain of the S.S. Bremen was informed by wireless that the quota for 1923 was filled for German

immigrants. They had to stay out on the ocean until January 1, 1924. Otherwise the ship owners would have to pay a fine for every passenger above the quota. Of all the people they knew they were the only family coming in December 1923 paying their own fare; all others ~~having~~ had received loans from relatives.

Arriving as second class passengers, Max and Mela did not have to go through Ellis Island like all third class immigrants had to. They also had a little money to show their independence. Max went to the North German Lloyd looking for a job but there was no opening. A friend of Max's, a former co-worker in the Munich travel office, succeeded in finding a room and job in Buffalo. Max and Mela also decided to go there rather than remain in New York City where so many other immigrants would be seeking jobs. His friend worked at the Danahy Meat Packing Company and took Max there to look for a job. Max knew nothing about packing but explained how he had done bookkeeping for a travel office. His arithmetic was tested and he was hired as a billing clerk. He was very lucky in that he got a "white collar job" on his first day of looking for work. In fact, at no time during his working years, 1924 through 1958 when he retired at 65 years of age, was Max out of work - his last job being an agent for the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company for over 25 years.

On Max's salary of $23.00 per week, they were soon able to move into an unfurnished apartment and start buying furniture. To improve his English, Max enrolled in a night course at a local high school, but instead of enrolling in the English class, he enrolled in the French class in order to learn two languages at once. Life in America had begun.

In spite of the great hardships endured in leaving Germany, language difficulties, no relatives to offer moral support or financial assistance, and against the advice of the German Emmigration Office, Max and Mela Kopf proved that by determination and hard work their belief of a wonderful life in America could come true.